

THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

000 must have got to loathe those rattling ovens, the desert battle-wagons!

None of us felt like walking the ten miles to Ral-al-Khaimah. We decided to invite the Khan Sahib to give us his advice. He at least knew the locality; but to our surprise he had disappeared. We assumed he had designs of his own, and waited patiently in the shade of an old palm tree until he should return. On our left the creek flowed lazily as the tide came in, while to our right lay open fields of clover, divided by plantations of thriving date palms, each about a quarter of an acre in extent, and surrounded by flint-and-mortar walls three feet high. The trees are carefully tended from the first planting, and the plantations contain as many as twenty to thirty deep wells each, from which the water is hand-drawn by means of buckets attached to long ropes.

On some plantations there is a simple, but effective, irrigation system; this consists of channels running at right angles, like the lines on a crossword puzzle. The young plants are placed in the ground between these channels, and are surrounded by low mud walls. This enables the water to collect around the roots in a saucer-shaped depression. The roots penetrate the soil for five or six feet in their search for water, and trees in their prime (about twenty years old) reach a height of thirty feet or more. The bark is composed of the stem-base of the leaves or fronds, which die off each summer. The fruit begins to form in July and the dates are ready for picking in September. They are then packed tightly in boxes and taken by camel or dhow to the merchants for export. Those intended for local consumption are either dried, or else pickled in their own syrup, to which is sometimes added wild honey and ginger, making a delicious concoction.

Herds of cattle were grazing in the fields, watched by young Arab boys; they sang ditties to each other or told stories, a favourite desert pastime. The cattle are very small and anæmic compared with European stock, the largest bull being no larger than a young English heifer. Like the Indian cattle, from which no doubt they are descended, they are hump-backed and have a pathetic moo-oo which resembles the cry of a nursery toy cow. The Arab farmers tie the forefeet of their cattle together to prevent them from straying, and their progress when being driven reminded me of a two-legged race.

000 We had brought a .303 service rifle with us. It had originally belonged to one of our Askhari guards, but he had not looked after it [Ten miles from Ras-al-Khaimah - - Analyst]

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245 gives nitrogenous value to the soil. The subterranean channel rises to the surface in the middle of the plantation, where it is collected in a large cement reservoir; from this source the water, carefully controlled in volume, is conveyed by pipes and runnels into narrow ducts constructed at right-angles to the paths. Palm trees are very thirsty and require plenty of water in the hot weather.

A single *Askehari* guarded the plantation, which was noisy with the chatter of brilliantly-plumed birds; for our amusement he climbed a tall palm with the agility of a monkey, using a rope-sling as a support, and dexterously cut a bunch of male flowers for our inspection. The flowers, which have a sickly sweet smell, are tightly packed in a tough protective sheath; these sheaths are sold, when ripe, and used to pollinate the female palms. They are also edible, being very palatable when boiled and eaten with butter sauce. When, a few months later, I passed through Djaidh, the green dates were already forming, and labourers were high in the trees, tying veils of muslin around them to protect them from insects. The dates which are intended for export are gathered when they are light brown, that is, half-ripe, and are often packed with the stalk attached. The Arabs usually prefer them fully
 [262
 257] ripe, when the colour is dark brown; over-ripe dates are used for the manufacture of syrup which, when crystallized, makes a good brown sugar. Hives are often kept in the vicinity of the plantations and the air was full of their buzzing as we passed through the glades.

712 Before we reached the encampment we passed the ruins of an old fort. Nothing but the outer shell remained and the gateway had long since lost its magnificent doors; the walls were of rose-pink clay and mortar, and the crumbling tower was crenellated like the ramparts of a mediæval French castle. Sheikh Hamid told us that the fort originally belonged to his grandfather, Sheikh of Kalba, who at one time included Djaidh among his possessions; but a succession of tribal wars had decreased the influence of the Kalba clan and Djaidh had degenerated into neutral ground.

487 The road to the encampment was a mere body-wide track through tall grass, so high in places that we could not see ahead. Presently two little Arab boys, leading an emaciated bull, greeted us as the truck emerged from this forest and entered a wide, muddy
 312 river bed. Here we saw the first of the wells. A gang of labourers
 483 was busily letting down baskets into the main channel, while the
 000 tribesmen looked on. The headman, a fine-looking old Arab